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The impact of the new technologies in foreign language instruction our experience

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Abstract

Although XXIst century education has become increasingly permeable to technology helping students to acquire skills needed to exist in a highly technological knowledge-based society, foreign language instruction is still resistant to employment of the New Web 2.0 technologies. In situations where the classroom represents the only environment for foreign language acquisition and practice, asynchronous Web 2.0 tools offer students a venue for additional interesting and engaging activities, ensure student-centeredness and autonomy as well as interaction and connectivity, and provide opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening outside the classroom walls at their own pace, in real life-semblance and safe environments. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that employment of Web 2.0 tools in foreign language instruction, besides increasing foreign language exposure and use, enhances the levels of student satisfaction, motivation, confidence and disposition which are crucial for communicative life-long foreign language learning. We will illustrate how Web 2.0 technology has been successfully used as a supplement for communicative practice in order to help adult higher education (HE) students with mixed abilities, outside commitments, and lack of immediate motivation to communicate in a foreign language and to experience a variety of communicative activities. The results are based on a survey of a recent international exploratory workshop on Optimizing the Quality Standard in Higher Education ESP (English for Specific Purposes) organized by Dimitrie Cantemir University (DCU) of Targu Mures, Romania, as well as student evaluation through questionnaire of technology-based ESP learning at DCU versus learning through classical strategies and methods. English language teachers should explore and exploit Web 2.0 tools as part of their professional development in order to make their students' language learning experiences real, motivating, and lasting.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).*Keywords:* foreign language instruction, new technologies, student gratification, Web 2.0 tools, motivation, autonomy, higher education.

1. Introduction

Universities are the main knowledge producer and distributor in modern societies in so far as economic, institutional, and cultural development depend on knowledge. Improving the quality of education is a challenge for every university concerned with *student gratification* regarding the quality of teaching.

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The premise for this study was represented by the already acknowledged superiority of connectivism engendered by Web 2.0 social networking technologies, alongside with the rise of the individual who has more potential to co-create and connect in global conversations and socialization, immediacy and now, blurring of the physical and virtual worlds (Siemens, 2009).

Within this context, employment of NT-based learning in HE-ESP is a long-range strategy for the future vocational training, with flexibility and facility of access representing an enabler of life-long learning as well as a catalyst for change and sustainability.

Technology represents a growing and rapidly evolving practice with potential benefits on students. In situations where the teacher and the classroom represents the only environment for foreign language acquisition and practice, asynchronous Web 2.0 tools (Brian, 2006; Campbell, 2003; Downes, 2005; Duber, 2002) offer students an alternative venue for additional interesting and engaging activities, ensure student-centeredness and autonomy as well as interaction and connectivity, and provide opportunities to practise reading, writing, speaking and listening outside the classroom walls at their own pace, in real life-semblance and safe environments.

English language teachers were among the first to recognize the benefits deriving from employment of the social networking tools in foreign language acquisition and established the first communities of practice for continuous professional development and dissemination of best practices (English Village Online, Becoming a Webhead, EFL).

However, employment of NT-based learning in foreign instruction is slow and faced with reticence by many ESP teachers due to lack of awareness, more comfort with text environments, deficient computer literacy and contentedness that "technology alone does not deliver educational success" (Virkus, 2008:272).

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that employment of Web 2.0 tools in foreign language instruction, besides increasing foreign language exposure and use, enhances the levels of student satisfaction, motivation, confidence and disposition which are crucial for communicative life-long foreign language learning. We will illustrate how Web 2.0 technology has been successfully used as a supplement for communicative practice in order to increase motivation and experience a variety of communicative activities.

1.1. Sources of Evidence

The results are based on a survey of a recent international exploratory workshop on Optimizing the Quality Standard in Higher Education ESP organized by Dimitrie Cantemir University (DCU) of Targu Mures, Romania, as well as student evaluation through questionnaire of NT-based ESP learning at DCU versus learning through classical strategies and methods.

On May 8th, 2009, Dimitrie Cantemir University of Targu Mures organized an exploratory workshop on Optimizing the Quality Standard in Higher Education ESP (<http://espworkshop.mures.orizont.net>), the event benefitting from a TOEFL grant NJ, USA. The majority of topics revolved around ESP curriculum and the Common European Framework, materials design, communicative strategies, learner autonomy, teacher training and applied linguistics.

There was one section on ICT-based learning/teaching (14.3%) with 2 online international participants out of the five face-to-face presentations. Although according to a survey performed on 70 ESP teachers in Romanian HE, the top perceived need of ESP teachers is for instruction in technology-based learning and e-learning (Pop, 2009), the 2 presentations on ICT-based instruction and Web 2.0 tools in EFL learning, respectively, by online international key speakers raised ample debates.

Concerns were expressed regarding copyright issues (teachers are afraid of making their class walls transparent and making their materials public), unaccountability and cheating by students, insistence that students working online or asynchronously from home may conduct to the decay of institutional learning, teaching with technology is time-consuming for the teacher, and that technology will never become a substitute for learning.

Despite the extremely attractive and relevant examples of how technology can be effectively and profitably employed in English language teaching offered by the two online key speakers, the conclusion is that there is poor awareness about employment of technology as lever for optimizing the quality standard in HE foreign language instruction.

This skeptical attitude towards NT-based environments for language learning fails to consider that confinement to the teacher (most commonly non-native) is utterly restrictive and that the world outside does not speak the classroom language (Dieu et al, 2006). Web 2.0 tools can place students into real learning situations where they are

exposed and use the target language *in vivo*, where neither the teacher nor the students have total control but which can shape, enhance and amend their communicative competence.

2. Our experience

2.1. Stage I – Greater autonomy with CML

Computer-mediated independent learning (CML) was introduced to first and second years in Economic Sciences of DCU at the beginning of the university year 2007/2008 in order to encourage students to take more responsibility for their language learning and enhance flexibility as far as timing, workload and proficiency levels are concerned. These elements were considered crucial as private university students have outside commitments and class attendance is optional. We have set up “The Business English Class” (BEC) as a venue for general and Business English activities, a space outside the classroom where the focus of activities is on students interacting in the target language. ESP input was customized to suit the students’ learning styles, pace, and cognitive needs, which is more difficult to meet in face-to-face courses.

For the beginning we have included materials for two levels of complexity: beginners and lower-intermediate targeting pronunciation, ESP vocabulary, and grammar reinforcement of three basic skills: reading, writing, and listening. *Word* was used to create multiple choice and matching vocabulary and grammar exercises, graded reading course materials and graded grammar resources, listening activities including recording by the teacher – students could listen as many times as they wanted, no longer relying on the teacher’s correction (for senior learners pronunciation represented a challenge) – and writing (email exchanges portfolio on previously specified subjects which allowed for meaning negotiation as in real communicative situations). Feedback and explanations were also introduced so that the teaching component be also present. Links to online courses and BBC learning English sites were provided for revisiting the respective language, while teamwork presentations by previous and current year students were posted for reading comprehension and self assessment.

The purpose of this strategy was to initiate measures that would enable an increase in the awareness of choices in what can be learnt and at the same time to produce more independent learners.

2.1.1. Results

Integration of flexible modules alongside standard institutionalized processes led to an increase in motivation which was measured through questionnaire and as a degree of involvement in CML activities. Students’ stated preference for CML versus classical resources correlate with their expressed opinion about BEC. While 56.8% of the students preferred digital resources for reasons of accessibility, attractiveness, optionality, and no financial effort, 25.68% of them stayed with the course-book since the latter either did not have Internet access at home or had paper-based medium affinity. On a three options scale, 52.29% of the students considered BEC an extremely useful tool in their preparation, 25.68% considered it useful to a certain extent whereas 22.01% had never heard of it or did not assist them with language learning. Comparing the interviews at the beginning of the year with these results, we can also observe a paradigm shift in the students’ perceptions of teacher-dependence as they feel more independent and take a greater responsibility for their success or failure.

2.2. Stage II. Going public with Web 2.0

The second stage of NT-based English learning targeted besides autonomy, higher levels of communicative interaction and feedback from a larger sphere of international users in life-semblance and safe environments. In 2008 we introduced learning through Web 2.0 tools that combine ease of content creation with Web delivery and collaboration: Wikis (for collaborative projects), personal blogs (reading/writing), Vaestro, VoxoPop (listening and speaking), Voice Thread (reading/listening/speaking), email writing. The general goal was to provide a better integration of the four skills, to create content, meet different learning styles and proficiencies, monitorize and enhance L2 exposure and use.

The 2nd stage was introduced selectively with 122 second year students of Economic Sciences at DCU of Targu Mures studying BE and a research project was conducted to track its superiority to classical learning. Seventy students (Finances and Banks section) representing the control group learned BE in the classical text-book based

environments while 52 students (the Economy of Tourism, Trade and Services) representing the experimental group, learned BE with the New Web 2.0 technologies. In both groups respondents were of mixed ability, predominantly females, with ages ranging between 19-45. Both groups learned the same subject matter (Business English coursebook) that was taught by the same teacher in 2 hours/week face-to-face classes and assignments.

In both groups the basic business communication skills generally perceived as the core of business activity were telephoning, socializing, giving presentations, participating in meetings, negotiating, presenting and evaluating elements of an employment file at the interview, advertising a business/touristic package, making reservations, writing emails, financial reports, faxes, letters. The text materials were tailored to the digital environment in order to accommodate asynchronous reading/writing/speaking/listening activities that included: a class blog, individual student blogs, a collaborative Wiki, voice tools: VoxOPop Talk group, VoiceThread asynchronous speaking and listening, movie makers. The teaching methods for the control group (C) were of communicative type: role plays, simulations, group and pair work, discussion and projects.

Students' gratification level was surveyed at the end of the year during the last class through a two-category 5-point Likert scale questionnaire that measured the quality of the material ("attractively and clearly presented") and of the methods ("stimulated interest, motivation for learning") as well as open-ended questions to assess the students' concretely perceived strong points of the newly introduced tools in group E.

3. Results and discussion

The category material was evaluated as neutral (Table 1) by 42.7% of the students in the control group whereas accessibility and flexibility in time (T) and space (S) of access to the subject matter determined more students in E to assess the material as attractive (73% strongly agree) than in C (21.4%). One of the reasons for this bias in E is that having outside commitments (family, part or full time jobs), adult students value the availability of materials and ability to practice at their own pace. Despite some adult students being less digital native, they preferred to practice in a safe environment rather than risk face loss in front of more proficient peers.

Table 1. Material quality

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neuter	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
C group	0	2.8%	42.7%	32.8%	21.4%
E group	0	0	7.6%	19.2%	73%

The category „method quality” was evaluated as „strongly agree” (Table 2) in proportion of 76.9% by E respondents as compared to 17.1% in C. Repetitiveness of experiences, task breaking, and ability to explore and re-edit/re-record were perceived as major strengths of this method likely to enhance their BE abilities. Moreover, the subcategory novelty contributed to method attractiveness and impact, although certain senior learners may have lacked digital environment affinity (9.6%).

Table 2. Method quality

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neuter	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
C group	0	0	28.5%	54.2%	17.1%
E group	0	9.6%	0	13.4%	76.9%

Motivation, confidence and disposition measured as the degree of student involvement in class and out-of-class activities and practice, which are crucial for communicative foreign language learning, were significantly higher in the experimental group. Furthermore, the variety of communicative activities as well as the novelty of most of them, imposed a constant pace in the E classes. In E the outcomes were visited and commented by friends and theoretically by the whole world or revisited and reflected upon by students whereas in C projects were perceived as written only for the teacher and colleagues.

The amount of time and foreign language production (exposure and use) were significantly higher in group E than in group C as was the degree of student involvement in optional projects (blogging). The impact of learning English for Specific Purposes with Web 2.0 social networking tools can be summarized as follows:

- authentic in vivo interaction: opportunity to collaborate with peers but also professionals outside the class walls;
- encountering of different accents, essential for developing the listening/understanding skills;
- revision and reediting as well as task breaking are possible;
- instant response and feedback, exercising reflective thinking skills;
- higher levels of motivation measured as student involvement in optional projects;
- extended language learning time and place;
- a more independent approach – working towards autonomous lifelong learning and sustainability;
- face-saving - students can contribute asynchronously with adequate prior preparation and rehearsal;
- memorability of experiences;
- familiarity with a communication tool that students will carry into their future professional life after graduation.

4. Conclusion

Renovation of learning through multiplication of the modes of interaction, patterns of engagement involving real tasks and people as well as attractivity and accessibility make Web 2.0-based language learning superior to the classical communicative face-2-face learning and contribute to student gratification. Despite poor awareness about employment of technology as lever for optimizing the quality standard among ESP teachers, empirical data certify that exploitation of Web 2.0 tools is likely to increase the degree of student satisfaction under the variables „material” and „method” attractivity.

In situations where the classroom represents the only environment for foreign language acquisition and practice, asynchronous Web 2.0 tools offer students a venue for additional interesting and engaging activities, ensure student-centeredness and autonomy as well as interaction and connectivity and provide opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening outside the classroom walls at their own pace, in real life-semblance and safe environments.

The conclusion is that if teaching to future professionals is to comply with customer satisfaction requirement, ESP educators should explore and exploit technology wisely. Our role as educators is to overcome reticence and to convert Web 2.0 social networking tools from living technologies that higher education students like into learning technologies that they use and will be using in order to make their experiences richer, real, motivating, and lasting.

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